

[Beaver County Times](#)

May 11, 2010

ROCHESTER — John Neely of the Upper Beaver Valley Veterans Service Center told a crowd of veterans and leaders who gathered at the VFW in Rochester his biggest pet peeve: “People in the position of knowledge that don’t have a clue what they’re talking about.”

But there were plenty of knowledgeable people on hand at Post 128 Monday night when it came to veterans issues. A town hall meeting hosted by U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, aimed to have an open dialogue with veterans and organization leaders about veterans issues.

And the discussion was vigorous, ranging from suggestions for discharged veterans and a North Vietnam flag hanging in the Pittsburgh City Council chambers, to comments about the Agent Orange Equity Act and post-traumatic stress disorder. Crowd members also discussed new laws that could impact them and shared views on how to better improve veteran benefits and services.

Altmire, who has introduced six legislative initiatives to help veterans and military families, told the crowd of about 60 people that the VA’s budget has been funded at a level exceeding the recommended level for service organizations. Altmire said the VA has a current backlog of about 700,000 cases nationwide, but that 4,000 new case workers have been added for hire. In addition, he pointed out that four outpatient clinics in Monaca, New Castle, Sharon and, most recently, Cranberry Township, are locally available for veterans.

Skip Haswell, president of Beaver County’s Vietnam Veterans of America chapter, praised the VA for going above and beyond to help him. But he also questioned why it took 11 months to get an appointment for his physical.

“If it took me 11 months, how long is it taking these Iraqi vets,” Haswell asked. “There’s a lot of vets coming back ... They need help now.”

Members of Altmire's staff and advisory board, and representatives of other veterans organizations were also there to answer questions about benefits and casework issues. Altmire said his veterans advisory board is made up of about 30 members from around the district. The board tries to meet quarterly in different locations, and has previously held forums in New Castle, North Hills, Cranberry and Murrysville, Altmire said.

John P. Cyprian, director of Butler County veteran affairs, answered Haswell's question that returning veterans are getting top priority for medical attention, and responded to other questions, such as the question Dan Sinclair of Beaver Falls asked about "Blue Water" Navy veterans being ineligible for Agent Orange presumptive service.

Others, such as Don Villella, a retired Army sergeant major, informed the crowd of a crisis hotline through Beaver Valley, while encouraging those who didn't need the help to pass along the number.

Veterans who attended said they felt the time was well spent and informative.

Dan Murdoch of Rochester thanked Altmire and his staff for supporting veterans issues.

Carl Curtis of Economy, who retired from active-duty in the Marines and instructs the Junior ROTC program in the Ambridge Area School District, said it was nice that Altmire was interested in "the issues veterans are dealing with."

"It's a good opportunity whenever you get a group of veterans together with expertise and knowledge such as this," Curtis said.